

Talks ahead for national renewal

The storm may fell even the mightiest tree in the forest. But after it passes, life begins again. The life-giving rays of the sun reach down from the heavens. They give light to the previously covered places. The streams of water are replenished. The air is refreshed once more. It is in a forest, so it is with the nation. The deaths by cruel assassination of two of the country's most prominent political leaders in the space of barely a week of each other certainly occasions for national remorse. They may also be the painful birthpangs of a national revival in Sri Lanka without which all political endeavours will come again to naught.

President Ranasinghe Premadasa and Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali were both outstanding personalities who, we must remember, inspired strong and contrary emotions among different sections of our people. However, the bitter claims and counter-claims that have followed their demise need to be transcended as the nation consolidates itself to achieve the unity and prosperity which they envisioned.

When the initial shock has passed, it is incumbent upon those to whom the torch has passed to ensure that the course of self-destructive politics our country has endured for well nigh two decades is brought to a speedy end.

Above all, the two assassinations serve to remind us that every action brings forth its reaction and that, in the longer term, means and ends are indeed one and the same. That evil yields evil and good yields good is a truth as old as history which is the confirmation that the politics of violence, by its very nature, is neither stable nor sustainable for long.

The temptation to engage in acts of political violence is difficult to resist when the stakes are high. It is increased when the means to do so are readily available in the form of private armies of undisciplined thugs and criminals.

Therefore, the disarming of all private armies should be the most urgent priority of the new President, His Excellency D. B. Wijetunga and his government.

In a democratic state ruled by law, the only rightful bearers of weapons are the armed forces of the state and the police. No one else, for whatever reason, should be permitted to bear arms.

In the areas of the north and east where the immediate disarming of the rebel groups is not practicable, the government together with the opposition needs to strain every nerve, and harness every moral and spiritual resource, to reach a negotiated settlement.

What the country needs is neither the politics of violence nor of exclusion, but instead it needs the politics of cooperation. To the extent that the Western-acquired models of the Executive Presidential and the Westminster Parliamentary Systems have been misperceived and misused, they have encouraged a "winner take all" attitude.

As a result they have both been

tremendously harmful to the country and have led political parties and individual politicians to destructive rivalries.

Therefore, as its second priority the government should set in motion a process of far reaching constitutional change in which power will be equitably distributed in society, between the state and the citizen, the government and opposition, between the majority and minority ethnic communities and between the urban and rural areas.

Achieving the two goals of a violence-free society and a balanced constitutional structure would require a period of at least one year in which the different political forces in society can get to work cooperatively.

In the present period of political polarisation and mistrust it is unlikely that the government and opposition parties, by themselves, can manage the required process of transition.

It is in this context, therefore, that the role that individuals from outside the political arena, who have not got themselves trapped in the vicious cycle of polarisation and mistrust, can play should be carefully considered.

With the foregoing in mind I earnestly request President Wijetunga to transcend the narrow political considerations that have determined governmental policies in the past. It is this self-centred attitude, and lack of an all encompassing vision, that have led to the present polarisation and mistrust in society, the use of violence against opponents, corruption and wastage and the victimisation of non-governmental organisations, including the Sarvodaya Movement.

The country is ready for healing and change, of that there can be no doubt. Every time I go to a village I am assured that the adversity that I, and countless others in the nation have undergone, have prepared and disciplined us for what lies ahead.

To quote Mahatma Gandhi, "There will have to be rigid and iron discipline before we achieve anything great and enduring. That discipline will not come by mere academic argument and appeal to reason and logic. Discipline is learnt in the school of adversity". The challenge to renew our wounded nation must be accepted jointly, not selfishly or alohe.

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